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INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS PANAMA 001578

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SUBJECT: SAN MIGUELITO AND PANAMAQS GROWING GANG PROBLEM

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Gang activity in Panama is growing, but so too is the GOPQs awareness of the problem as well as GOP and civil society response to it. Gang activity is evident not only in the capital itself, but also in small communities such as San Miguelito, also part of the metropolitan area of Panama City. Pro-active groups, however, are having a positive influence on at-risk teenagers around the country. END SUMMARY.

Gangs in San Miguelito

2. (SBU) The San Miguelito Police Chief, Subcommissioner Christian Hayer, said there were multiple gangs even in his district, during his July 26th meeting with POL Intern (LEGATT NOTE: Most of the gang activity takes place in the metropolitan area; San Miguelito is outside of the municipality of Panama City, but still within the metro area. END LEGATT NOTE). Hayer asserted that socio-economic strife, broken homes with only one parent, and the lack of positive role models contributed to the social derailing of potentially upstanding citizens. Gangs in San Miguelito's high-crime area usually began with a score of members, according to Hayer, but then usually divided into numerous smaller groupings in the wake of inevitable disagreements among gang members. This proliferation of groups was a double-edge sword, Hayer explained. One larger group might allow the Panamanian National Police (PNP) to track gang members closely, but such a larger group also created fertile ground for growth of particular gangs, including internal structure and hierarchy to some level. On the other hand, explained Hayer, small factions made it hard to track gangs and their members. For example, according to Hayer, former members of the Los Sopranos gang had recently formed the Corazones Negros gang. The proliferation of smaller gangs, in turn, fostered internal gang rivalries and greater hostility among gangs, thereby leading to a more dangerous environment.

San Miguelito Gang Profile

3. (SBU) According to Hayer, the median age of gang members was between twelve and seventeen. These minors quickly became involved in committing armed robberies, homicides, and, in some cases, the trafficking of drugs and firearms. Victims of gang violence in San Miguelito were usually mini-market employees/owners, bus riders, and average pedestrians, Hayer noted. While smaller gangs might feed their drug habits with the proceeds gleaned from armed robbery, larger gangs with established structure engaged in much broader and

more serious criminal activity. Hayer explained that ring leaders of larger gangs owned nice homes in residential neighborhoods as well as luxury cars. Hayer also confided that former police officers were some of the identified ring leaders. Likewise, prominent individuals, like Thonya Xiomara Hubbard (a/k/a Madame Thonya), who was accused to having run a prostitution ring that provided the services of minors, also lived in nearby residential neighborhoods and enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle. Ring leaders, Hayer clarified, were not likely to be found doing robberies or selling drugs, but rather they only gave orders sending lower ranking gang members to commit felonies. Ring leaders from larger gangs were heavily involved with drug trafficking, usually involving ties to Colombian nationals.

Confronting the Challenge

14. (SBU) Hayer has assigned two groups of officers to address the gang issue, one assigned to collecting intelligence and the other conducting raids and other operations against gangs. Hayer asserted that his intelligence units had most gangs under surveillance. There had not been any major crackdowns on gang activity in San Miguelito, however, stemming in part from ignorance about Law 48, a law approved in August 2004 that categorized and detailed sentences for criminal gang activity and the sale and possession of prohibited firearms. Hayer admitted that he had not seen the text of Law 48 until a couple of weeks earlier. Hayer hopes to begin implementing Law 48 in San Miguelito within the next three months. Whereas before, PNP could not detain identified gang members, Law 48 empowered the PNP to act against individuals who joined or associated with three or more persons with the intent of committing criminal activity. If convicted under this law, gang members could be sentenced to one-three years imprisonment. Ring leaders or those who support gang activity economically or logistically would face three-five years imprisonment.

Tug-O-War Battle

15. (SBU) Hayer commented that Panama's judicial system was too lenient on minors. Adolescents who committed serious crimes were arrested and out on the streets a couple of days, if not hours, later. PNP Director Rolando Mirones expressed his concern over the current law in his July 28 comments to newspaper Panama America. Concerned by the lack of action taken by judicial authorities in implementing different aspects of the law, Mirones asserted that the law sided with criminal adolescents and did not protect them from themselves or protect society.

16. (SBU) Reflecting his frustration in dealing with the Juvenile Court System, Hayer complained that a juvenile only needed to complain about rough treatment or tight handcuffs to win a judge's empathy and subsequent release. To be successful in addressing the gang problem, Hayer called for a unified government approach and cooperation among different government entities, including the PNP and Juvenile Court System.

QBE THE CHANGE YOU WANT TO SEE

17. (SBU) Non-profit groups, as well as private businesses, however, are working to prevent adolescents from falling into criminal activities. Youth Against Crime (JCD), for example, modeled itself after Youth Crime Watch of America and motivated young adults to avoid falling into drugs, prostitution, and illicit activity. JCD Vice President Giovanni Fletcher commented that JCD Chapters were active in schools around Panama and held different activities such as forums and sports matches as ways of keeping kids off the streets. Although many great programs such as the one above were active, Fletcher confessed that many organizations fell into economic hardship and were unable to continue prevention programs around the country. The USG granted JCD USD 40,000 both in 2005 and 2006 to fund one of its programs in the province of Colon.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) PanamaQs gang situation is nowhere near as serious as it is in other Central American countries and should not be compared to the chaos that maras cause elsewhere in Central America. Although gangs in Panama try to emulate the prominent gangs of Central America by tattooing themselves that identify them with their gang, there is no sort of national network or hierarchy of the same level found here. (LEGATT NOTE: Authorities are aware of the gang problem and have control of it. END NOTE). Awareness of the problem early on has prevented gang proliferation. The incorporation of proactive measures learned from U.S. police anti-gang units has kept Panama from progressing into the mara model found in other Central American countries. However, greater intergovernmental cooperation is vital if the GOP seeks to continue preventing an exacerbation of gang activity in country. An awareness that Panama may need to reevaluate its laws on minors is growing. END COMMENT.

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